

## TOO HIDEBOUND: HEEDING INNER DIVINITY AND STEMMING CLASS PREJUDICE IN A REPUBLIC OF TRUTHS

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In the summer of 1900, William James wrote a loving note to his son Aleck, who was ten at the time. “Your ma thinks you’ll grow up into a filosofer like me and write books,” the father wrote. “It is easy enuff, all but the writing part. You just get it out of other books, and write it down.” He should know; at the time, James was hard at work on the lectures that would become *Varieties of Religious Experience*, a book made mostly out of quotations from other books. We may chuckle at this bit of fatherly advice, with its fetchingly modest implication that James was a derivative thinker, because the unspoken reason we are all here is that we don’t think James was derivative at all. On the contrary: we have all devoted a significant proportion of our adult lives to studying James because we think he had something original, important, and valuable to say. We think that something had a lot to do with truth—as the title of this panel attests—and that it was just another show of his characteristic, seductive humility when he subtitled the book *Pragmatism* “a new name for some old ways of thinking.”<sup>1</sup>

Well, maybe. But I think there is something to be gained by troubling such received truths about James, a few of which I will identify and explain in a bit more detail before contextualizing them in his work and in the history that made it possible. Yes, history. I know there are a lot of philosophers here, but I’m not one, and my training as a historian leads me to think of James as not only a maker of history, but also a product of it. Therefore, arraying James and his work in multiple contexts helps explain the meaning and significance of his ideas. The untold backstory and sidestories to pragmatism I’ll open up today shed a lot of light both on the

nature of Jamesian truth and on the pluralism that accompanied his signal contribution to the world of ideas.

But first, the received truths I will trouble. There are three of them. The originality I already invoked is one. The complaint that James was not as focused on the prospects and perils of democracy as other pragmatists, most notably Dewey, is another. The technical proficiency of his theories relative to more professional philosophers is the third. Loosening up all of this conventional wisdom makes James much more a man of his times, and that much more significant, really, for his historicity.

Received truth number one, then, is that James matters not for how he may have developed other people's ideas but, on the contrary, that his strikingly original cast of mind allowed him to take one pragmatic germ from C.S. Pierce and then to spring forth a grand set of theories—pragmatism, radical empiricism, and pluralism—which he then left to others to develop, systematize, and interpret. To others starting with Dewey, and leading to us.

His originality consists not only of his vaunted literary style, not even primarily of that way with words that makes a corollary truism of the claim that he wrote psychology like a novelist, his brother Henry novels like a psychologist. It was his way of thinking about truth, and experience, the center of one's vision, and the "ever not quite" of insight that distinguished James not only from his contemporaries but from everyone else in the history of philosophy up until that point. True, some acute observers note James's quite explicit indebtedness to Emerson, his so-called "godfather," and all sorts of analytical comparisons between James and other philosophers abound, but the history of his intellectual lineage is curiously abbreviated, as though the seismic shifts of the Civil War, Darwinian evolution, and the birth of modern culture cut James off from all that went before.<sup>2</sup>

But it did not. James was a product not only of his eccentric father and Swedenborgian mysticism, his eclectic European education and formative trip to Brazil, or the Metaphysical Club and sparring contests with the younger Oliver Wendell Holmes, but of a Boston and Cambridge that in the 1870s and '80s was culturally, intellectually, and spiritually very clearly continuous with the Boston of the 1840s and '50s: filled with religious thinkers who loved democracy and wanted to weave more of it into life. Most of them were still Unitarians before the Civil War; in James's Boston they were free religionists, or members of the Radical Club, where James met his wife-to-be, or fellow lecturers with James at the Concord School of Philosophy, or summer sojourners with James in Keene Valley in the Adirondack mountains, or neighbors in Chocorua, New Hampshire. Contemporaries of James's like the minister Samuel McChord Crothers, the free religionist Francis Ellingwood Abbot, the Unitarian John White Chadwick, the theologian Charles Carroll Everett, the prophet of democracy Thomas Davidson, and the ethical culturalist William Mackintire Salter are not the peers who typically make it into our conversations about pragmatism and radical empiricism because if the technical perfection of James's philosophy left something to be desired, theirs was positively unmentionable. They were amateurs. And yet they, like James, asked questions about how and whether one could have a religious faith in a scientific age, what role experience plays in the making of truth, whether the universe is one or many, and whether moral action is possible without free will. And their concerns, like those of James, grew out of a common cultural inheritance in romantic reform.

You might point out that what we find original about James is not his questions but his answers, which is fair enough. However, one underpinning of the essential humanism that he shared with these peers and their common intellectual heritage is absolutely crucial to understanding the pluralism he later developed: immanence. Divine immanence. Immanence was

not a word James used—“inner divinity” was more his style—but whatever you call it, James, his fellow Bostonians, and their mutual forebears all cared very little about the possible existence of a transcendent God out there, up there, responsible for creation and therefore susceptible to threats from scientists like Darwin; they cared very much for the idea that everyone bears a spark of divine essence and that this is the basis of both their rights and their potential. In this the father of Unitarianism—Reverend William Ellery Channing, who died the year James was born—resembles our father of pragmatism very much, and if I had the time today I would draw their intellectual connections with care. But let me point out just a few of Channing’s incipient pragmatisms in order to illustrate how James was, in part, but the reddest and ripest of the apples to fall from Channing’s tree.

Channing took actions to be the test of meaning, or of truth. This is best illustrated by an oft-repeated story from Channing’s youth, when he heard a terrible Calvinistic sermon on innate depravity, complete with threats of fire and brimstone, the inescapability of punishment for sin. Terrorized, the young Channing was even more dismayed when his father pronounced upon the sermon: “sound doctrine.” Sound doctrine! Then it was true! Dejected, the young Channing accompanied his father home. On the way, his father started whistling a cheerful tune. At home, his father calmly picked up the newspaper and started reading. The young Channing realized, “No! his father did not believe it; people did not believe it! It was *not* true!” For if innate depravity and Calvinistic predetermination were really believed, such mundane cheer were impossible.<sup>3</sup>

This relates to a second Jamesianism in Channing, a rejection of determinism as incompatible with moral action. One must have at least “a wiggle of the will,” in James’s language, in order to behave rightly; this is how James splits the difference between orthodox

Christianity and scientism. As I said, Channing's god was not terribly transcendent, and in the indwelling of the divine principle, individuals have the opportunity to choose the good, or at least the better, and thereby progress morally, and spiritually, which amounts to much the same thing. So here we have another pragmatism, focusing on the process itself as the site of meaning, ameliorating conditions. This emphasis on practice brings to mind the term James first used for pragmatism: practicalism. Channing said once "the whole of my life may be called, as it truly has been, a *process* of conversion." There is a strong feel of the "ever not quite" in this confession.<sup>4</sup>

There is more I could elucidate about the ways Channing's thought anticipated certain crucial features of James's philosophy—fallibilism, a future-orientation, and the contextual nature of truth are all important—but one deserves particular emphasis because the whither I'm tending with all of this is a fresh understanding of James's pluralism. James believed that different kinds of people are suited to different kinds of beliefs, right? The tender-minded and tough, the once-born and twice-born, the healthy-minded and sick-souled are all categories he used to describe different mental characters, which he then matched to different suitable beliefs. This is just one angle of James's pluralism, but it's an important one, because it says the truth is many-sided, and no one can purvey their own truth as universally suitable. Channing, good Christian though he was, thought much the same thing. He and some other Unitarians of his time were ecumenical, in favor of a "broad church" movement to include diverse beliefs, and this was not only a shrewd strategy for growing their denomination. When two famous heretics rocked the Unitarian church in the 1830s and '40s—I'm speaking of Emerson and Theodore Parker—Channing was perfectly sanguine. After Emerson's Divinity School address of 1838, Channing defended him against the charge of belittling Christianity and said, "there are divers gifts and

divers ways of presenting the truth. Mr. Emerson seems to be gifted to speak to an audience which is not addressed by any of the rest of us.” When Theodore Parker unwittingly broke with Unitarianism by lecturing on “the Transient and the Permanent in Christianity” in 1841, Channing again could not go all the way with the young heretic, but he praised Parker’s spirit as “honest” and “earnest,” urging him to continue speaking out “fully and freely.” This openness of Channing’s to multiple religious truths is an appropriate context for understanding James’s pluralism, as we will see.<sup>5</sup>

But first to trouble the second received truth about James, which is that as pragmatists go, he was relatively unconcerned with democracy and the problems of life in an industrial society. Indeed, the general understanding of this weakness of James’s social thought holds that this is regrettable in him. We would be prouder of James if he had done more to fight lynching, for example, beyond sending a single letter to the *Boston Evening Transcript*, or if his proud stance on American imperialism had been part of a broader historical record of activism on issues ranging from the rights of laborers to fair wages and bargaining power to the right of women to vote. The idea is that James was really an individualist—suspicious of “bigness and greatness” in all their forms, right?—where Dewey was the pragmatist who paid attention to the social sphere.<sup>6</sup>

Two objections. One is that not being an activist is not the same thing as not caring. For all the richness of James’s historical record, we actually do not know where he came down on every issue, how vociferously he may have argued over dinner on topics cognate to those we ourselves may argue over our own dinner tables without penning so much as a letter to the editor. But we do know how seriously he took Emerson, and if we’ve looked at James’s own volumes of Emerson’s works we know how energetically he underlined Emerson’s many passages urging his listeners to be true to their own callings. Activism was not James’s calling. We may be glad that

he pursued his vocation, a more fundamental engagement with the issues of perception and truth-claiming from which social problems spring.

The second objection to the idea that James was not engaged in the social problems of his time, however, is a request that we look more carefully at his words, once again. There was no individual in James's thought separate from all others. When he talked about "great men" he did not mean that they acted somehow alone. It may have taken George Herbert Mead to develop the social self but we all know it was James who named that self, social, and took its obligations seriously. When James used the example in *Principles of Psychology* of the alcoholic who decided to take a drink but "won't count it this time," and teased that "a kind Heaven may not count it; but it is being counted none the less," he was neither betraying a facile theism nor merely invoking the importance of habit in the formation of character. James was also writing out of the conviction he developed after his metaphysical crisis in his twenties that, in a quasi-Manichean manner, our actions are votes deciding what shape the universe will take. All of our actions, seen and unseen, count in creating the world we share. This, for James, is what "makes life worth living."<sup>7</sup>

I will deal more fully with this received truth about James's social thought in the course of treating received truth number three, which is essentially a lament over how unsystematic a thinker James was. If the thinness of his social engagement is regrettable, so too is the looseness and lack of clarity with which he stated his positions, for which we then depend upon a Lovejoy to carve into thirteen varieties. This view holds that there is much left unsaid in James's own oeuvre and that we will therefore continue to argue about what he really meant and what the implications of his theories are. This standard of philosophical excellence comes, of course, from the professional phase of academic philosophy, which began in the last decade of James's life—

James, the M.D., who wrote compellingly about the Ph.D. octopus that has ensnared us all. Professional philosophers like a watertight argument, technical virtuosity, specialized vocabulary, and exceptionless proofs. According to these standards, the best James may be the latest James, at least the most reliable James or most actionable James is the James who was actively trying to speak not to Unitarians or college teachers but to professional philosophers. In this way, *A Pluralistic Universe* of 1909 is the best place to go to understand what James meant by pluralism and what it meant to him. As he somewhat proudly, somewhat sheepishly reported of himself, at the end of his life he was trying to put forth as complete a system as possible, to have a last word despite his belief in the inescapability and even desirability of every word's being partial, contingent on its context, and fallible. So we take this last word as his best word because it is the one fashioned most to suit us professionals.<sup>8</sup>

However—*pace* to all you professional philosophers—academic philosophy has no firmer lock on any capital T truth than any other audience, pragmatically speaking. Other audiences, James's prior audiences, elicited different emphases from James, emphases that flattened out when James moved to systematize, which meant that he moved to generalize and depersonalize the pluralistic approach into rules that could apply anywhere. Valuable as that work is, the specific examples he used in his earliest attempts to explain pluralism are also valuable, particularly for efforts to understand the extent and significance of James's social thought. For although James certainly used pluralism as a corollary of pragmatism and radical empiricism—as a description of reality itself, reality as pluriverse—his pluralism was also something of a prescription. James recommended pluralism as a way of looking at others, really, as a practical tool for human progress, and this recommendation came first in the arena of religious belief and then in terms of class. It took later thinkers, most notably James's own

student Horace Kallen, to apply his pluralism to ethnicity and to race. It took Charlene Haddock Seigfried to apply it to gender.<sup>9</sup>

The problem of class divisions forms the subtext to James's companion essays, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" and "What Makes a Life Significant." I call them companion essays because "What Makes a Life Significant" clearly continues the argument of "On a Certain Blindness," which served as the basis for last year's presidential address before this group by John Lachs. I am not going to argue here with Lachs's contention that James overlooked several types of human blindness or that mitigating them more than slightly is both impossible and pernicious, although my reservations may become apparent. But I will take issue with one textual interpretation Lachs made, when describing the scene in North Carolina James used to illustrate the operation of human blindness. You'll recall James's description of the girdled trees, the rude dwelling, the poverty, and his driver the woodman's defense of their settlements. Lachs said that James "thinks the woodman's perception of his bit of reality is equally dismaying," which is possible only if "dismaying" means devastating to James's prior viewpoint. For James represents his response to the woodman's statement as an illumination: "I had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation." James credited the woodman with sacred significance.<sup>10</sup>

"Inward significance" is closely related to "inner divinity," as the rest of the two essays shimmeringly suggest. The importance of the subject to James is evident not only from his drawing attention to "On a Certain Blindness" in the preface of the volume in which it was published, nor only in the letter he wrote to his young friend Pauline Goldmark, saying that he hopes she will care for the truth it tries to express, but from the fact that in his correspondence, "blindness" becomes a metaphor he uses with friends and family to suggest that counteracting

“our brutal ignorance of one another” essentially became James’s chief spiritual practice. To give just one example, in 1900 his wife’s sister and her husband—this is William Mackintire Salter and his wife—adopted a Native American boy. Prior to the adoption, James wrote his mother-in-law trying to get her to discourage them on practical grounds. After the adoption, he wrote again to her, saying “It has been as striking a case of ‘a certain blindness’ as I ever knew, I taking the external mercenary mechanical view of an act which, as livingly entered upon by the Salters, was evidently one of passionate faith and impulse. I didn’t realize that Mack himself *wanted* the child so much.” Here it is several years after he wrote the essay, but he is still using the term “blindness” to characterize how hard it is to see into one another’s experience, and yet how crucial it is, because that living reality that beats within another’s breast is the reality that matters most in human relations.<sup>11</sup>

This is pluralism. It is not only tolerating a remote, inaccessible reality, but crediting it with validity and working to revise one’s own reality—one’s “stock of truths”—in light of it. Now, this pluralism originated in the context of religious beliefs ranging from orthodoxy to outright atheism, but in these companion essays again and again James deals with issues of class. These examples make us uncomfortable, I think, and so we shy away; James’s language is so late Victorian, so unselfconscious, so certain that his audience is completely made up of people from his own elite type. But that tells us even more about his time and its distance from ours. We may be sure that our audiences are middle class now, because academia bestows that upon us all, but we mostly believe academics get here by merit or luck and that the American dream applies, so we do not assume we all arrive with the same experience. Plus we have all been through the consciousness-raising of the last third of the twentieth century. We therefore use safer examples in our illustrations of pluralism: private-sphere examples, interpersonal examples, politically

correct ones. James did not, because he really was trying to figure out how to credit laborers, so remote in experience and subjectivity from himself, with equally intense, equally valid, equally active inner divinity as his own kind.<sup>12</sup>

Looking carefully at James's language in these essays, we find that what sounds condescending is more like groping, the groping he uses as a form for mirroring the content of the essay, which is that the only way to try to dispel the blindness is to approach it gradually, partially, acknowledging the partiality of the effort but valuing the effort of trying to divine the inner subjective reality of another. James refers to "we of the highly educated classes (so called)," which cues his understanding that life still educates the uneducated; it educates them with lessons he and his audience have not learned. He tries to imagine his way into those lessons, and it is here we get squeamish: James's talk of "savages and children of nature," peasant women in Vienna, the quid of tobacco and the glass of beer does not sound like enlightened talk to our ears. But listen: "Divinity lies all about us, and culture is too hide-bound to even suspect the fact." Trapped in the hides of our cultures, not blessed with the American open-ness of a Walt Whitman, we miss the heroism "in the daily lives of the laboring classes." James is using the same term here, by the way—"the laboring classes"—as Orestes Brownson, most radical of the Transcendentalists on issues of class.<sup>13</sup>

James asks whether contemporary authors are "still too deep in the ancestral blindness, and not humane enough for the inner joy and meaning of the laborer's existence to be really revealed? Must we wait for some one born and bred and living as a laborer himself, but who, by grace of Heaven, should also find a literary voice?" Again, we cringe from this language. Is James suggesting that only divine grace could make a laborer write well? I think instead he is essentially protesting the social conditioning of his highly classist society, where child labor was

absolutely legal and widespread, where the eight-hour movement was practically a pipe dream, and alienation between workers and management was so extreme that Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*—a utopian fantasy contemporary with these essays—depicted worker/management relations as essentially warfare, which has been corroborated by historians. James thought this extreme situation kept anyone born working class from developing the literary voice that would allow a reader like James to understand their experience.<sup>14</sup>

So he had to imagine it himself. Aided by Tolstoy's romanticization of Russian peasants, Walter Wyckoff's memoir of his year as a day laborer, Robert Louis Stevenson's description of life in the slums, and Phillips Brooks's testimony to "the higher manliness of poverty," James tried to speak to "what is called the labor-question" as principally a problem of blindness. Blindness to the "ideality," or inner divinity, hidden within workers. Recovering James's historical roots in the antebellum romantic reformers who thought so much about indwelling divinity helps us understand the function of his pluralism here. Recognizing the company he was in outside of academic philosophy, in the 1890s when he wrote these essays, helps us grasp the last lines of "What Makes a Life Significant." James urged a pluralistic apprehension across class lines: "If the poor and the rich could look at each other in this way, *sub specie aeternitatis*, how gentle would grow their disputes! what tolerance and good humor, what willingness to live and let live, would come into the world!" Under the gaze of eternity, or according to their essential form, as beings with equally divine but hidden inward impulses: James thinks this view would cool class antipathies.<sup>15</sup>

Naïve, I'm sure, where money is concerned, but this is essentially the idea behind the most progressive social actions being taken in James's time on this issue. The settlement house movement aimed for what Habermas would call intersubjectivity, exactly this Jamesian mutual

opening up of inner significance. Salter arranged conversations between workingmen and management in Chicago on the same logic. James's friend Thomas Davidson gave lectures on New York's Lower East Side on a similar principle, a venture that became the Breadwinner's College before being absorbed into City College. James was in good company in thinking, as he wrote to Jane Addams in 1902, that "The religion of democracy needs nothing so much as sympathetic interpretation to one another of the different classes of which Society consists." Define "class" broadly, and it may yet.<sup>16</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William James to Alexander Robertson James, [May 1900], *The Correspondence of William James: Vol. 9, July 1898-1901* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2001), 196-971. *Pragmatism's* subtitle provides a useful entry to neopragmatism in James T. Kloppenberg, "Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking?" originally published in *Journal of American History* in 1996, reprinted in Morris Dickstein, ed., *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 83-127.

<sup>2</sup> James latched onto the mystic Benjamin Paul Blood's phrase "ever not quite" as a way of capturing the elusiveness of ultimate truth, as in *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Putnam, 1909), 321. The importance of Emerson to James appears most recently in Robert Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 153-55. Richardson also follows the tradition of seeing James more in terms of his incipient modernism rather than as a product of pre-Civil War history, as does Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A History of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2001) and George Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *William Ellery Channing: An Essay on the Liberal Spirit in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 55-56.

<sup>4</sup> William James to Thomas Wren Ward, March 1869, *The Correspondence of William James: Vol. 4, 1856-1877* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 369-371. David Robinson, ed. *William Ellery Channing: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 10.

<sup>5</sup> On the broad church movement and its leader, the minister Frederic Henry Hedge, see Bryan F. LeBeau, *Frederic Henry Hendge, Nineteenth-century American Transcendentalist: Intellectually Radical, Ecclesiastically Conservative* (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1985), 107. For Channing's reactions to Emerson and Parker, see Paul Revere Frothingham, *William Ellery Channing: His Messages from the Spirit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 30-32.

<sup>6</sup> This oft-quoted phrase comes from William James to Sarah Wyman Whitman, letter of June 7, 1899, in *Correspondence, Vol. 8: 1895-June 1899* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 545-46.

<sup>7</sup> William James on "Habit" from *The Principles of Psychology: Briefer Course* in William James, *Writings, 1878-1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 150-51. His essay "Is Life Worth Living?" (1895) is reprinted in *ibid.*, 480-503.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Thirteen Pragmatisms," *The Journal of Philosophy* V (January 2, 1908): 5-12; (January 16, 1908): 29-39. James, "The Ph.D. Octopus" (March 1903), in James, *Writings, 1900-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 1111-1118.

<sup>9</sup> Horace M. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924); Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> John Lachs, "Human Blindness," *William James Studies* (2008): <<http://williamjamesstudies.press.illinois.edu/3.1/lachs.html>> [accessed 15 Jun. 2009.] William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," *Writings, 1878-1899*, 843.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 708. The "brutal ignorance" phrase comes from James's letter to the progressive social reformer Pauline Goldmark, April 18, 1899, in *Correspondence, Vol. 8, 1895-June 1899* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 515-17. On Salter's adoption, see James's letters to Eliza Putnam Webb Gibbens, [June 20, 1900] and [July 5, 1900], in *Correspondence, Vol. 9, July 1899-1901* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 233-34, 244.

<sup>12</sup> For "stock of truths," see first *Pragmatism* (1907), in *Writings, 1900-1910*, 513.

<sup>13</sup> James, *Writings, 1878-1899*, 856, 857, 866, 867. Orestes Brownson's article is actually titled by the book he is reviewing—Thomas Carlyle's *Chartism*—but scholars generally refer to it as his essay on "The Laboring Classes," the real theme of the piece. See Art IV, *Boston Quarterly Review* 3.3 (July 1840): 358-435.

<sup>14</sup> James, *Writings, 1878-1899*, 867. Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (Boston: Ticknor, 1888). Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> James, *Writings, 1878-1899*, 873, 877, 880.

<sup>16</sup> This important concept was first introduced in Jürgen Habermas, tr. Thomas McCarthy, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985). James to Addams, letter of Sept. 17, 1902, in *Correspondence Vol. 10: 1902-March 1905* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 124.